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ABSTRACT

Despite a lack of consensus on theoretical perspectives on public relations and variations in the ways it and interpersonal communication are defined, public relations may be related to interpersonal communication in three ways: (1) it is two-way communication, (2) it is personal, and (3) it is relational. Even in activities having the highest persuasive purposes, such as managing social, economic, and political issues, public relations focusses on two-way communication. Interpersonal communication explains this two-way communication. Public relations functions are also psychological rather than social, and personal rather than impersonal. Public relations practitioners act as "linking pins," individuals occupying positions both in the organization and in some external system. This idea needs further consideration on the interpersonal communication level. Finally, public relations is relational. This means that as interpersonal communication it provides information between communicants beyond content. (JL)

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Currents, Curricula, Controversies
Public Relations As Speech Communication

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

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Those entering public relations occupations are most likely to have studied public relations in undergraduate journalism departments. These departments, nationally, administer 49.5 percent of the university and college public relations programs, according to a 1981 survey by Albert Walker of the status and trends in public relations education in United States senior colleges and universities.[1]

Public relations study in journalism departments has remained unchallenged, though Walker notes that since 1970, "a trend is indicated toward more specialized interdisciplinary approach and away from the journalism influence."[2] Currently, 18.9 percent of the universities responding to the Walker survey offer public relations courses through their speech communication departments.

Public relations as a course of study in speech communication departments is not without controversy. Public relations (and advertising and organizational communication) were called "theoretically vacuous" degree offerings in a 1981 SCA Spectra editorial.[3] Letters followed arguing that such degree offerings were important to preparing students for non-academic careers and for recognizing the diversity of speech communication.[4]

This paper proposes that public relations has conceptual ties to interpersonal communication study. Other papers have presented ties between public relations and such speech communication perspectives as organizational communication, persuasion and rhetoric, and mass communicaiton.[5]

In describing interpersonal communication concepts relevant to public relations, there are two limitations to be noted: (1) the lack of concensus on theoretical perspectives; and (2) the variations in definitions of interpersonal communication and public relations. First, in both the study of public relations and of interpersonal communication, there is yet to be concensus reached on what will be the social and/or philosophical science theoretical perspectives. Public relations publications are widely known to be descriptive and not oriented toward research and theory. Hesse initiated a study of political communication strategies in a recent Public Relations Review article by stating:

> . . . a study in 1975 reported the body of knowledge in public relations is limited to descriptive research. Little true theory exists. It is no wonder than that the 'professionalism' movement of public relations has been stymied. One of the necessary conditions in the development of a profession is a systematic body of knowledge.[6]

Public relations writings do not consider particularly speech communication theory or concepts. The authors of the four most widely used public relations texts, according to the Walker study, attest to the "vast oversimplification" of their treatment of communication theory and of the communication process.[7] An important exception is the work of Grunig who applied organizational communication theory to public relations.[8]

Interpersonal communication study currently has several metatheoretical orientations. There are, according to Pearce "clearly a number of indigenous disciplines of interpersonal communication which vary considerably in metatheoretical orientation."[9] Among the most visible were the Illinois Constructivists; Woelfel and Fink's Measuring Communication Processes: Galileo Theory and Method; network analysis; Cushman's rules' perspective; Pearce and Cronen's coordinated management of meaning; Miller's compliance gaining strategies; McCroskey's work on communication apprehension; and groups roughly identified as thinking about interpersoanl communication as "interactional."[10]

There is a limitation in relating public relations to interpersonal communication because the definitions of both public relations and interpersonal communication vary. Public relations has become synonoymous with public affairs, promotions, publicity, marketing, fundraising and community relations, to name a few alternate occupational titles. Public relations functions are found in such settings as corporate, government, associations and voluntary agencies, educational and cultural institutions, and political parties.

Interpersonal communication is variously defined. Three definitions that

differentiate interpersonal from noninterpersonal communication are: (1) definitions that focus on the source of norms, when individual or private rather than social norms or rules govern interaction; (2) definitions emphasizing the rules which coordinate the activity of individuals in regard to the presentation, development, and validation of individual self-concepts; and (3) definition predicated on the type of information upon which individuals base their choice of communication strategy.[11]

There does seem in these three groupings generally to be a break from the situation definitions of interpersonal communication, that required a certain number of participants, etc., and from the interpersonal qualities definitions, as e.g. more feedback or more immediacy.[12]

These theoretical and definitional limits are important. What will be connected between interpersonal communication and public relations will not be by accepted definitions, theories or metatheories, but instead related hypotheses, concepts, and variables that appear to be representative of the public relations and interpersonal communication literature.

What Is Public Relations?

To relate public relations to interpersonal communication will mean a conceptualizing at a much abstract level than mass communication academics have attempted. In her study of twelve introductory mass communication textbooks, Cline found that the authors assigned public relations to the role of "bastard stepchild of communications -- the role one adopts in order to sell out and become a flack if one doesn't like the low wages of journalism."[13]

This paper selects the public relations description officially adopted by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) at its 1982 national convention. The beginning paragraph describes public relations as:

> . . .helping our complex, pluralistic society to reach definitions and functions more effectively by contributing to mutual understanding among groups and institutions. It serves to bring private and public policies into harmony.[14]

This public relations description identifies several public relations functions and processes. The public relations functions encompass: (1) analyzing public opinion, attitudes, and issues; (2) counseling management regarding courses of action and communication as these actions have public ramifications; (3) monitoring actions and communications to achieve public understanding; and (4) carrying out efforts to influence public policy.

The public relations process "utilizes a variety of professional communication skills and plays an interpretative role both within the organization and between the organization and the external environment."[15]

The PRSA definition is one among many in public relations writings. It is representative of the definitions included in the four most widely adopted public relations textbooks (See Table 1).

What Is Interpersonal Communication?

Anderson, in his review of interpersonal communication across three decades advances two approaches to defining interpersonal communication. Traditionally, most definitions of interpersonal communication view it as occurring at a "level" between intrapersonal communication and mass communication.[16] This "level" perspective is conceptualized further by Miller as psychological rather than social:

> When communication is interpersonal it is marked by a qualitative shift in which participants are seen as individuals as opposed to social roles.[17]

Given this position, Anderson concludes, "interpersonal communication is virtually synonomous with relationship communication."[18]

A second approach in defining interpersonal communication is that of Weaver's set of interpersonal communication criterion. These criterion are:

TABLE 1: FOUR DEFINITIONS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE MOST WIDELY ADOPTED PUBLIC RELATIONS TEXTS

Author(s)	Title	Definition
Scott Cutlip & Allen Center	Effective Public Relations	. . . the planned effort to influence opinion through good character and responsible performance based on mutually satisfactory communication.
Douglas Newsom & Alan Scott	This Is PR: The Realities Of PR	. . . responsibility and responsiveness in policy and information to the best interests of the institution and its publics. The public relations practitioner is the intermediary between the interest represented and all of the involved publics. Public relations involves research into all audiences, receiving information from them, advising management of attitudes and responses, helping set policy that will demonstrate a responsible attention to these attitudes and responses, and constantly evaluating the effectivenss of PR programs.
Raymond Simon	Public Relations: Concepts and Practices	1. a planned effort or management function; 2. the relationship between an organization and its publics; 3. evaluation of public attitudes and opinions; 4. an organization's policies, procedures, and actions as they relate to said organization's publics; 5. steps taken to ensure that said policies, procedures, and actions are in the public interest and socially responsible; 6. execution of an action and/or communication program; and 7. development of rapport, goodwill, understanding, and acceptance as the chief end result sought by public relations activities.
Allen Center and Frank Walsh	Public Relations Practices: Case Studies	. . . the planned efforts to create mutually satisfactory communication between an organization and those public groups on which the organization's success or failure depends.

(1) involves two or more people;
(2) involves feedback;
(3) need not be face-to-face;
(4) need not be intentional;
(5) produces some effect;
(6) need not involve words;
(7) is effected by context, and
(8) is affected by noise.[19]

These criterion are of interest here because they do dispel some interpersonal communication misconceptions. One misconception of interpersonal communication is that it concerns "touching and feeling." Interpersonal communication is thought to enhance individuals' self-concepts if only they would learn the skills to do so. Skills suggested include listening actively, especially for the "feelings" rather than the information contained in messages.

Weaver's criterion suggests otherwise. Rather than interpersonal communication concerning touching and feeling or producing any effect tied to anything, Weaver's criterion reduces the view that senders and/or receivers plan or intend. Instead, participants may not be conscious that there is indeed to be an effect.

Also, the Weaver criterion assists dispelling the notion that interpersonal communication concerns getting to know the other (s) intimately, more bluntly expressed as "learning better dating skills." Devito, for instance, supports this view by including in his basic text units on friendship and love in interpersonal relationships.[20] The Weaver criterion suggests neither romance or any reward for communicating interpersonally.

Weaver's interpersonal criterion involving two or more people, not necessarily face-to-face, reduces further the dating onus. This is important because while public relations has as a uniform objective establishing goodwill and understanding and acceptance of the organization, public relations functions are not always friendly or romantic.

Public Relations and Interpersonal Communication

In reviewing both public relations and interpersonal communication literature, public relations may be related to interpersonal communication in three ways. Public relations is two-way communication. Public relations is personal; and, public relations is relational.

Public relations is two-way communication. Public relations is defined across the board as two-way communication or described with such similar terminology as mutual understanding, satisfactory communication, and social responsiveness. Newsom and Scott depict "responsibility and responsiveness;"[21] Simon lists as elements steps taken to ensure that actions are in the public interest as well as acting and/or communicating.[22] Even in activities having perhaps the highest persuasive purposes, as for example the function to manage social, economic, and political issues as they do or may affect corporate objectives, public relations focuses on the two-way communication. . ."institutions, corporations, and nonprofit organizations participate as listeners and as advocates in social dialogue on vital issues.[23]

Interpersonal communication explains this two-way communication in public relations. First, interpersonal communication does not intend that there be some effect, according to Weaver. In contrast, mass communication is to evoke a particular response.[24] What effect is achieved is the product of an exchange characterized as "developmental" or "coordinated." The public relations is negotiated. Although there may be preconceived goals and objectives, these become modified and shaped as the public relations practioner and internal (employees for example) as well as external publics interact.

Public relations image building, a popular myth about the field, may suggest some intended effect, but the reality is expressed clearly by Southwestern Bell practitioner Jim Pattillo who states:

> All the image building goes down the drain for the telephone industry the very first time the customer starts having a hard time with his telephone service or with company representatives.[25]

The lack of control in evoking particular responses is in fact in public relations literature a source of frustration, as practitioners want more and more to test the effectiveness and efficiency of their actions.

Public relations is personal communication. In reference to the level of communication discussed, public relations functions are psychological rather than social, personal rather than impersonal. Psychologically, public relations has been depicted as . . ."the buffer zone, the no man's land in which public relations practitioners so often find themselves in trying to establish and maintain credibility."[26]

This buffer zone may be connected to the organizational communication concepts of "linking pin" or "boundary spanning activities." The linking pin concept describes the individual occupying positions both in the organization and in some external system.[27] Boundary spanning means that the individual acts to transfer information between two systems.[28]

The buffer zone or linking pin concepts however, needs further consideration at the interpersonal communication level. How does, for instance, the individual manage to operate in two separate environments? The public relations literature is suggestive of the practitioner "mediating" and "interpreting." As with Miller's social rather than psychological norms, public relations functions begin with identifying social objectives -- the social norms and social interests to which corporate behavior should be responsive. Public relations practitioners, however, do not function successfully merely be enacting social or even organizationally--spcified roles. Instead, somehow the practitioner must move beyond these roles to the individual actions that are capable of creating as well as maintaining relations, sometimes with people who have few common purposes or understandings.

Daily has provided some psychological variables that may describe what is important to practitioners to bridge between corporate and public(s) interests. In measuring the responses of research and development team members to transferring in outside information, Daily found strong relationships to boundary spanning between locus of control, job satisfaction, individual motivation, perception of group cohesiveness and collaboration, task uncertainty, and individual productivity. For example, as one's locus of control became more internalized, boundary spanning activities increased.[29]

Public relations is personal rather than impersonal. Although there is social science technology available to do public opinion polling, content analysis, and experimental research -- all at impersonal distances, the public relations person must still learn information from others by such abilities as "good character." Center and Walsh state about character: "'You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear' is still true..."[30]

Public relations is relational. Relational communication as interpersonal communication concerns providing information between communicants beyond content. This information is the product of the on-going communication among the participants. Complementarity and symmetry have been suggested as central concepts.[31]

Institutions, according to the PRSA definition must develop effective relations with employees, members, customers, local communities, shareholders, other institutions, and with society at large. These relations are on-going because institutions are dependent on such publics in order to achieve goals. Public relations pioneer Edward Bernays specifies that the public relations function concerns knowledge and understanding of human relationships.[32] Cutlip and Center define communication as "a process that requires a minimum of two people coming together in an information sharing relationship, using a set of common information signs.[33] These perspectives describe a domain in public relations communication beyond symbolizing and exhanging -- to how the exchanges become distinguishable over time, distinguishable as the individuals in the relationships.

The relational perspective explains why perhaps the public relations function conceives only to main relations rather than such goals as influencing or informing. The practitioner and the investigatory reporter may struggle not over the control of messages, but instead over the definition of the relationship.

Summary

Public relations conceptually tied to interpersonal communication is limited to continuing theoretical discussion and various definitions of the terms. This paper, however, proposes three linkages because public relations is two-way communication; public relations is personal communication; and public relations is relational communication.

The public relations practitioner is first of all a communicator. Too often public relations writers get bogged down with the activities of public relations, such as feature stories, speeches and news releases. Stepping back and examining the function and processes of public relations there looks to be an enormous communication domain.

Elwood Murray is reputed to have introduced the term interpersonal communication, having employed it first in his 1938 book entitled The Speech Personality.[33] The term used was "human relations," and defined as having to do with the interacting of persons as they carry on their various activities of living.

In an account by Cline, Murray revealed that his interest in person-to-person relations began because he admired his father, a cattle baron shipper and negotiator, who operated in central Nebraska.

> As a twelve-year old boy, Murray recalled, I admired the way my father could mix with the local farmers and make each one of them feel more important.[34]

Murray's description of interpersonal communication as the ability to mix, "to make them feel important," suggests a communication skill that is descriptive of public relations efforts -- it is intentional and persuasive in objective.

Notes

[1]Albert Walker, Status and Trends in Public Relations Education in U.S. Senior Colleges and Universities, 1981: Report of Findings. (New York: Foundation for Public Relations Research, 1981).

[2]Walker, p.1.

[3]Donald G. Ellis, "The Shame of Speech Communication." SCA Spectra, 18, No. 3 (March, 1982) p.1.

[4]Robert T. Oliver, "Letter to Editor," SCA Spectra, 18, No. 7 (August, 1982). p. 10. Also, Ron Gordon, "Practical Theory." SCA Spectra, 18, No. 9 (October, 1982). p. 2.

[5]For example, Richard Crable, "Rhetorical and Persuasion Theories: Foundations for Public Relations," ISTA Convention, Peoria, 12 Nov. 1982. Susan Rickey and Rick Hudson, "Mass Communication and Public Relations: Needs as Mediating Variables," ISTA Convention, Peoria, 12 Nov. 1982.

[6]Michael B. Hesse, "Strategies of the Political Communication Process," Public Relations Review, 3 (Spring, 1981), p. 32.

[7]These four texts are: Scott M. Cutlip and Allen H. Center, Effective Public Relations, 5th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1982); Raymond Simon, Public Relations: Concepts and Practices, 2nd. ed. (Columbus, Ohio: Grid Publishing, Inc., 1980); Allen H. Center and Frank E. Walsh, Public Relations Practices: Case Studies, 2nd. ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice Hall, 1981); Doug Newsom and Alan Scott, This Is Pr: The Realities of Public Relations, 2nd ed. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1981).

[8]James E. Grunig, "Organizations and Public Relations: Testing a Communication Theory," Journalism Monographs, No. 46 (November, 1976).

[9]W. Barnett Pearce, "Interpersonal Communication Theory: A Thirtieth Anniversary Assessment," SCA Convention, Louisville, November 1982, p. 10.

[10]Pearce, pp. 11 - 14.

[11]Timothy R. Cline, "Interpersonal Communication: An Overview," SCA Convention, November, 1982, pp. 8 - 9.

[12]Cline, p. 9.

[13]Carolyn Cline, "The Image of Public Relations in Mass Communication Texts," Public Relations Review, 8 No. 8 (Fall, 1982), p. 64.

[14]Public Relations Society of America, Public Relations, (New York: PRSA, 1982).

[15]Public Relations.

[16]Peter A. Anderson, "Interpersonal Communication Research Across Three Decades," SCA Convention, Louisville, November, 1982.

[17]Gerald R. Miller, Explorations In Interpersonal Communication, (Beverly Hills, CA.: Sage Publication, 1976) as quoted by Anderson, p.5.

[18]Anderson, p. 5.

[19]R.L. Weaver, Understanding Interpersonal Communication (Glenview, Ill: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1978).

[20]Joseph A. Devito, The Interpersonal Communication Book, 2nd. ed. (New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1980).

[21]Newson and Scott, p.5.

[22]Simon, p. 10.

[23]Robert L. Heath, "Corporate Advocacy: An Application for Speech Communication Perspectives and Skills . . . and More," Communication Education, 29, No. 4 (September, 1980), p. 371.

[24]Simon, p. 262.

[25]Jim Pattillo as quoted in Newsom and Scott, p. 166.

[26]Simon, p. 273.

[27]Grunig, p. 27.

[28]Robert C. Dailey, "Group, Task, and Personality Correlates of Boundary - Spanning Activities," Human Relations, 32, No. 4 (1979), p. 274.

[29] Dailey, pp. 279 - 284.

[30]Center and Walsh, p. 1.

[31]Malcolm R. Parks, Relational Communication; Theory and Research, Human Communication Research 3, No. 4 (Summer, 1977), p. 372 - 381.

[32]Edward L. Bernays, "Down with Image, Up With Reality," Public Relations Quarterly, 22, No. 1 (Spring, 1977), p. 12.

[33]Cutlip and Center, p. 191.

[34]Elwood Murray. The Speech Personality, (Chicago: Lippincott, 1937).

[35]Cline, p. 4.